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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 005330

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TAGS: PHUM PREL KIRF KISL XF JO

SUBJECT: CHRISTIAN MP COMPLAINS ABOUT USG RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
POLICY IN JORDAN, THE MIDDLE EAST

Classified By: PolCouns Doug Silliman for reasons 1.5 (B)(D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) A Christian member of the Jordanian Parliament complained August 20 that USG religious freedom policy in the Middle East hurts the indigenous Christian communities by encouraging emigration and diluting the strength of established churches by supporting foreign missionary groups. He suggested that the U.S. reports on International Religious Freedom (IRF) should focus on the status of the minority indigenous Christian communities, rather than how easily foreign missionaries can gain access to proselytize. He said that Jordan's indigenous Christians are completely free to worship and conduct church business, and that the community's problems most often stem from the actions of foreign missionaries. END SUMMARY.

MIDDLE EASTERN CHRISTIANS UNDER SIEGE

2. (C) In a lengthy conversation with PolCouns August 20, Greek Orthodox Parliamentarian Dr. Odeh Qawwas argued that the United States and Europe should be concerned with the condition of indigenous Christian communities in the Middle East. The already small indigenous Christian minorities in Jordan, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon are dwindling. He blamed European (and, to a lesser extent, American) immigration policies for the phenomenon: "It is easier for a Palestinian Christian from Jerusalem to emigrate than for a Muslim. This is why local Christians make up only a small and dwindling part of Jerusalem's population."

U.S. IRF REPORT MISSES THE POINT

3. (C) Qawwas then launched into a critique of the annual State Department IRF reports, arguing that the IRF "completely misses the point" in addressing the concerns of Middle Eastern Christians. As a board member of the Middle East Council of Churches, he said, he has read all of the IRF reports on Middle Eastern countries. "You focus too much on the problems of American and European missionaries, and on how Islam prohibits proselytizing. Instead, he said, the reports should give a more accurate picture of Christianity in the Holy Land and address directly the health of Christian institutions -- indigenous church membership, financial problems, and persecution of Christians or restrictions on the worship of indigenous Christians where it exists.

4. (C) In Jordan, for example, Qawwas said indigenous Christians enjoy "complete freedom of religion and worship" and get the support of the GOJ in most issues. He argued that the most serious problems facing the Christian community in Jordan come from the influx of "foreign missionaries" who do not understand either the history of the local Christian community or how to operate in Jordanian society. When foreigners proselytize Muslims, he said, local Christian institutions come under social pressure to prevent this taboo. When missionaries convert local Catholics, Orthodox, or Malkites, the Christian community itself is insulted. The missionaries "don't even recognize us as Christians" and thereby further divide an already small and divided community. He specifically criticized the inclusion in the IRF and human rights report of two cases -- the Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary (JETS) and the Arab Orthodox Church -- as instances in which outside religious figures were trying to take advantage of Jordan's religious tolerance and liberal approach to Christian institutions to support their particular parochial interests -- and, intentionally or unintentionally, sowing discord within Christian communities outside Jordan. The U.S., he argued, should not support one sect against another in this way.

5. (C) As a Jordanian Christian, he concluded, he is always balancing two competing impulses -- the need to protect and maintain the rights of the Christian community in overwhelmingly Muslim Jordan, and the desire to explain to the outside world the long-standing and deep respect between Christians and Muslims in the country. The U.S. and Europe could best help Christians in the Middle East by supporting

local church structures (particularly in Jerusalem) and Christian charities designed to help Christians to remain in their traditional communities in the region.

COMMENT

16. (C) Qawwas' harsh words for U.S. IRF policy stem from his position in the lay leadership of the local Greek Orthodox Church and the Middle East Council of Churches. These criticisms come from an influential member of the Greek Orthodox community, and represent the feelings of many Christians with whom we have spoken.

BIO NOTE

17. (C) Dr. Odeh Qawwas is a Greek Orthodox Christian, elected to the Christian seat of Amman's Third District (affluent west Amman). He is of Palestinian origin: his family is from the village of Beit Sahour in the West Bank. He is a surgeon trained in Athens. He speaks native Arabic, fluent Greek, and some English. He is an elected member of the board of the Middle East Council of Churches. He is married and has three daughters and one son. His eldest daughter has a degree in civil engineering from the Jordanian University of Science and Technology (JUST) in Irbid, and his second daughter has a degree in genetic engineering from the same institution. Qawwas chain smokes (and made several references to enjoying sitting with friends in the evening and smoking the argeileh (water pipe)).

HALE